



## Natural products fill gaps where medicines fall short

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**Spotlight**

**Michelle Norton**

Complementary healthcare has the potential to help patients when medications fall short, and a researcher in this field believes pharmacists have an integral part to play in providing natural health advice.

**Lesley Braun**, associate professor of integrative medicine at the National Institute of Complementary Medicine in Sydney, spoke about the increasing role of complementary healthcare at the Natural Products New Zealand Industry Summit (20 March).

Pharmaceutical drugs are often inadequate for conditions, such as mild depression and anxiety, because they are ineffective or have side effects, Dr Braun explains.

A recent study showed over half of New Zealanders aged 18 to 25 who had been prescribed antidepressants in the past five years had experienced suicidal thoughts (Pharmacy Today, April).

Complementary healthcare can be an effective alternative for these conditions.

For example, pharmacists can recommend St John's wort for depression, as long as they are aware of any drug interactions, she says.

New Zealand's ageing population and high rates of conditions such as depression are placing a burden on the health system.

Drug costs are going through the roof, and relying solely on pharmaceutical medications is an unsustainable healthcare model, Dr Braun says, adding, healthcare providers need to explore other options such as complementary healthcare.

In addition, people can become non-adherent to their prescription medications because they are trying to avoid side effects, so natural health options could be a good alternative.

Dr Braun has been involved in complementary medicine for over 20 years, initially training as a pharmacist and then as a naturopath.

She has recently been appointed as the Blackmores Institute director.

She believes integrating these two fields of healthcare helps to provide people with more healthcare solutions.

After doing her own research, Dr Braun used coenzyme Q10 instead of prescription medication to help with her migraines and her headaches have since reduced from a few times a month to a few times a year.

Speaking to Pharmacy Today after the summit, she explains the dosage instructions on natural health products are often very general, but by getting to know the patient and their symptoms pharmacists can tailor dosage instructions to the individual.

However, pharmacists need to have confidence in complementary healthcare to give patients the best advice, Dr Braun says.

Pharmacists will often have shelves full of natural health products but will not always have sufficient knowledge of them.

Attending short courses on natural health and having instore information for pharmacists to refer to, including key benefits and safety information, can help them gain confidence in this field, she says.

Ensure staff are confident advising on the pharmacy's top sellers in the natural health category.

It is also a good idea for staff to look into natural health options for any conditions which are common in the communities they work in.

If pharmacists are particularly passionate about this field they may want to upskill, but hiring a naturopath to work alongside pharmacists is also an effective model, Dr Braun says.

She believes complementary medicine can be integrated into all aspects of healthcare: For people who are already well and want to enhance their physical and mental health.

To reduce exacerbations of symptoms of non-serious diseases, such as the casual headache or a cold.

To help people cope with chronic health conditions - diseases where pharmaceutical drugs cannot provide a cure.

More research available When Dr Braun graduated from pharmacy school in 1985, lecturers told her there was no scientific evidence for natural healthcare.

However, in 1996, David Eisenberg from Harvard University travelled to China on an exchange programme and his observations helped to give credence to the role of natural health in the US.

Professor Eisenberg saw acupuncture being used in hospitals and made it a mission to further investigate complementary healthcare.

He believed it was health professionals' obligation to find out about complementary healthcare because it is so popular - to know how it works, whether it is effective and if it is safe, she says.

Natural health research continues to increase with more studies backing their use, she says.

In the future, complementary healthcare is likely to expand further in mental health and anxiety, cardiovascular health and cancer - both as adjunctive therapies and as replacements for pharmaceutical drugs, Dr Braun says.

There is also room to change the way people take natural health products; for example, taking glucosamine sulphate through a patch or a depot.

Medications are already delivered in this way, so there is room to explore whether this could work with natural health products.